

Tips for Difficult Dialogues

Instructors are responsible for maintaining a civil environment where multiple perspectives are respected and valued. These tips provide faculty members with strategies for facilitating planned or unexpected discussions that challenge students' own racial and ethnic biases. These strategies may also apply to student perspectives related to sexual orientation, gender, and religion.

Begin with Self-Reflection

- Your personal biography is reflected in your teaching practices. "Teachers knowing who they are as people, understanding the contexts in which they teach, and questioning their knowledge and assumptions are as important as the mastery of techniques for instructional effectiveness." (Gay & Kirkland, 2003, p. 181)
 - ✓ How do *you* think students with diverse racial and ethnic perspectives approach the content of your course?
 - ✓ How do *you* think students' perceptions of you might affect your relationships with them?
 - ✓ How are *your* perspectives similar to or different from your students?

Create a Safe Environment

- Develop written guidelines in your syllabus, clarifying your expectations regarding the standards for participation. For example, consider having students help create a civility statement the first day of class that is appended to the syllabus. An alternative is to have students develop ground rules prior to a discussion.
- Tell students about potentially controversial materials you will cover next class, so they have time to prepare.
- Include and encourage the study of alternative perspectives by providing choices for course readings and using community resources to present authentic accounts of cultural experiences.
- Provide an open, non-judgmental atmosphere for students to discuss diverse ideas. For example, if a student makes an offensive remark, ask students, "Why do some people hold this view?" and "Why do those who disagree hold other views?" (Warren, 2006)
- If a point is made that you do not feel comfortable addressing, tell the students that you will be prepared to respond the following class period.

Structure Challenging Dialogues

- Organize the conversation so everyone has a chance to speak. For example give students three coins, tokens or poker chips prior to the discussion. Each time a student contributes she or he puts the token in a pot. By the end of the session students must have used all of their tokens.
- Ask students to focus their initial conversation on the assignment itself and not to voice their opinion when you give them a pre-discussion assignment. Afterward allow students to voice their own informed views.
- Address inappropriate language or behavior immediately. When an inappropriate remark is made in class, turn to the student and repeat his or her exact comment non-judgmentally, and invite the student to respond. Usually the student will rephrase the offensive remark, often changing the meaning and intent (Frederick, 1995). If this does not occur, then address the remark yourself.
- Request compliance from a disruptive student. If student does not comply, is violent, or threatening, ask the student to leave the academic setting. If the student refuses, call campus police at 274-7911. Document the incident with the Dean of Students office as-the student may have a history of such action.

References

Frederick, P. (1995). Walking on Eggs: Mastering the dreaded diversity discussion. *College Teaching*, 43(3), 83-92.

Gay, G., & Kirkland, K. (2003). Developing cultural critical consciousness and self-reflection in pre-service teacher eEducation. *Theory into Practice*, 42(3), 181-187.

Warren, L. (2006). *Managing hot moments in the classroom*. Retrieved November 15, 2006 from Harvard University, Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning . <http://bokcenter.fas.harvard.edu/docs/hotmoments.html>.